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Adolescents between Siege and Hope

Research on the Educational and Social Factors
Leading to Secondary School Dropouts
Among Vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian Refugees

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List of Abbreviations

ALP	Accelerated Learning Programs
BLN	Basic Literacy and Numeracy
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
EiE	Education in Emergencies
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IASC	Inter-Agency Steering Committee
INEE	Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies
IOs	International organizations
MEHE	Ministry of Education and Higher Education
NFE	Non-Formal Education
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
OOS	Out of School
RACE	Reaching All Children with Education
VASYR	Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees
UN	United Nations
YBLN	Youth Basic Literacy and Numeracy (YBLN)

I. Introduction



School Dropouts Worldwide and in Fragile Contexts

School dropout rates remain a significant global concern, affecting both developed and developing countries to varying degrees (McDermott et al., 2019; Kumaret al., 2023; Yufrinalis & Uran, 2023). Despite extensive global efforts to address this issue through initiatives, programs, and funding from various international organizations (IOs), governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Dinesen et al., 2023; Bzour et al., 2022), an estimated 250 million children are currently out of school (UNESCO, 2023, September 18). In conflict-affected areas, the figures are more staggering, with lower secondary school-aged youth being two-thirds more likely to be out of school and having a 50% lower chance of completing secondary education (Henderson et al., 2023). Various factors contribute to dropout rates among children, particularly in secondary education. According to Bahou (2017), these influences encompass individual, global, family, community/societal, and educational aspects.

A recent report by the Secondary Education Working Group (SEWG) (2023) identifies three main analytical components influencing secondary education. The first level, comprising global and national factors, may impact the access, composition, and quality of secondary education on a macro scale across countries, thereby affecting youth's ability to pursue and complete their schooling. The second level pertains to community and school-level factors, including local decisions and actions shaping secondary education in crisis contexts, which may ultimately impact dropout rates, particularly regarding the implementation (or lack thereof) of policies affecting schooling in these fragile contexts. The third level involves adolescent development factors, specifically adolescents' identity, status, and personal development, which also influence these students' capacity to pursue and engage with their schooling in crisis contexts (Henderson et al., 2023). Studies have demonstrated that discontinuing education at any stage has long-term consequences for youth, their families, and society at large, underscoring the necessity, even urgency, of implementing more effective measures to address this issue (Mphale, 2014).

The internationally recognized principle that education is a fundamental human right becomes even more critical in crisis-ridden and fragile contexts. In these situations, ensuring the accessibility and continuity of quality education is vital as it is central to social and economic development and, crucially, to nurturing human capital (Seyoum, 2024; UNESCO, n.d.). Several studies have underscored the positive influence of education on both individuals and society, whether by promoting economic growth, fostering sustainable development, or mitigating inequalities. Education has even been found to reduce child mortality and contribute to peacebuilding efforts in conflict-prone regions (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007; Gakidou et al., 2010; Thyne, 2006).

Context of Lebanon

In regions grappling with political instability, economic and financial crises, and overall insecurity—often termed fragile contexts—the significance of education cannot be overstated (OECD, n.d.). Since the end of Lebanon's civil war in 1990, the country has faced recurrent episodes of violence and has been profoundly impacted by waves of national insecurity and widespread regional instability (INEE and Lebanon Education Working Group, 2014; UN, 2022). Lebanon's public education sector exemplifies the historical challenges that have shaped its current state. Over time, the sector has witnessed a gradual decline, largely attributed to government policies and legislation that catered to sectarian interests. This decline underscores the persistent challenges arising from historical conflicts and the repercussions of specific policies on Lebanon's education landscape (Centre for Lebanese Studies [CLS], 2023). Moreover, Lebanon hosts the highest number of refugees per capita and per square kilometer globally, with estimates indicating around 1.5 million refugees residing in the country, predominantly Syrian and Palestinian refugees (Janmyr, 2018; UNHCR, 2023).

In response to the Syria Crisis, the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education launched the RACE (Reaching All Children with Education) initiative in 2014 to address the educational needs of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. Initially targeting 400,000 out-of-school Syrian refugee children, RACE I aimed to enroll 200,000 in formal schooling and provide basic education support for the remaining children. However, the program encountered challenges due to weaknesses in the Lebanese educational system, leading to the segregation of Lebanese and Syrian students. Subsequently, RACE II, implemented from 2016 to 2021, sought a more strategic approach focusing on development and stabilization. Nonetheless, both RACE I and RACE II faced major challenges in meeting their objectives due to the economic and political pressures. In 2023, Lebanon launched its first nationally driven education sector plan, the General Education Plan 2021-2025, with the aim of enhancing the resilience of the education system through strategic objectives and reforms. Emphasizing collaboration between the public sector and private schools, key goals include improving access, enhancing learning outcomes, and establishing public-private partnerships.

The situation further deteriorated with the onset of the 2019 economic and financial crash, exacerbated by institutional paralysis resulting from a political impasse and a distinct lack of reforms across all sectors (UN, 2022). These dire economic and social circumstances were compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 Beirut port explosion. While grappling with multiple internal crises, Lebanon faced delays in implementing national strategic plans and a failure to enact structural reforms, significantly reducing the country's capacity to assist both citizens and refugees, let alone ensure their access to education (World Bank, 2022). As of 2022, approximately 55% of the Lebanese population and an overwhelming 91% of the refugee population were estimated to require humanitarian assistance (World Bank, 2022). Households have resorted to measures such as taking on debts, altering their lifestyle and expenditures, and depriving themselves of basic needs (UN, 2022). According to a recent UNICEF report, 84% of families had to borrow money for essential items and needs, marking an increase from 68% reported in April of the previous year (UNICEF, 2023). Consequently, accessing education in Lebanon has become increasingly challenging, leading to a rise in the number of dropouts.

The repercussions of Lebanon's recent conflating crises have extended to the education sector. Not only has the quality of education in Lebanon deteriorated, but studies have also indicated a progressive increase in school dropout rates among both Lebanese and refugee communities across the country.

Drop out and Enrollment Data

Enrollment in educational institutions saw a significant decline from 60% in the 2020-2021 academic year to 43% in the 2022-2023 academic year. Moreover, based on the multidimensional poverty index, approximately 1.45 million school-aged children residing in Lebanon require support to access basic services, including education. Among these, around 662,000 are Lebanese (52% girls), and more than 715,000 are Syrians (51% girls).

For Lebanese children, the primary reason for not being enrolled in school, according to 2022 Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) data, was the cost of education (registration fees, transportation, educational materials, snacks, etc.), accounting for 52% of cases. Additionally, data from the Central Administration of Statistics (CAS) indicates a steady percentage of non-enrolled Lebanese youth from 2019 to 2022, reaching 20.8% and 19.5%, respectively. Furthermore, among the 1.2 million Lebanese children, over 10% face barriers to accessing education, primarily due to economic vulnerabilities.

Among Syrian refugees, approximately 430,000 displaced individuals, constituting 60% of the displaced population, are currently not enrolled in formal education (OCHA, 2023). In 2022, only 32% of Syrian refugee caregivers expressed their intention to enroll their children in the 2022-2023 academic year, while around 44% of school-aged refugee children (ages 6-17) did not attend school, and 35% of youth (aged 15-24 years) reported never attending school while in Lebanon. By September 2022, about 47,000 Syrian children (57% of whom are girls) were registered in various non-formal education programs, underscoring the urgent need for pathways to formal education (OCHA, 2023). Additionally, 59% of Syrian youth (aged 15-24) are not employed, not in education, and not attending any training.

These findings highlight the significant challenges Syrian refugee children face in engaging with and continuing their education in the country. According to the 2023 VASyR results, the primary barrier to education for Syrians in Lebanon is the cost of transportation (30%), followed by the cost of educational materials (27%), schools not allowing registration (11%), and the necessity to work (9%). Familial factors and parental decision-making have also influenced dropout rates in Lebanon. Due to extenuating and dire economic conditions, many parents believe their children should pursue other financially rewarding objectives to support their families, often at the expense of education. Currently, 18% of families have chosen to send their children to work, marking an increase from the 11% reported in the previous year (UNICEF, 2023). Additionally, some refugee parents do not permit their children to enroll in school and prefer them to be married instead (UNHCR, 2022). The prevalence of child marriage persists among displaced Syrian girls, with one in five adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 19 being married, according to the VASyR (2022) survey. This trend is primarily attributed to heightened levels of debt resulting from the worsening financial situation, leading some families to resort to child marriage as an economic coping strategy (OCHA, 2023).

To delve deeper into the factors influencing dropout rates within the education system, it's crucial to highlight the significant yearly increases in registration and tuition fees within the private sector—a surge ranging from around 100% to 400%. Approximately 23% of Lebanese families reported facing a surge in private school tuition fees exceeding 400% (CLS, 2023). Consequently, many parents opt to transfer their children to public schools. According to the Lebanese Center for Education Research & Development, there has been an upward trend in public school student enrollment, climbing from 32% in 2019 (CRDP, 2020) to 36.5% in 2021 (CRDP, 2021). In contrast, the percentage of students attending private schools has witnessed a decline, dropping from 64.7% in 2019 to 59.9% in 2021. However, there was a subsequent decline in the following year, attributed to prolonged school closures and teacher strikes at the commencement of the academic year in public education, as reported by 73% of parents (CLS, 2023). This response was a reaction to the escalating economic situation and the challenges teachers faced in coping with the circumstances (Save the Children, 2021).

During the academic year 2022-2023, public education experienced a significant downturn, marked by substantial dropout rates attributed to consecutive irregularities in the public sector's academic calendar over two years and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (CLS, 2023). However, given the high levels of poverty in the country, it comes as no surprise that public school registration fees have also become prohibitively expensive for vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugees. Consequently, an increasing number of caregivers lack the resources to cover the exorbitant educational costs, whether in the public or private sector—including but not limited to registration fees, school tuition fees, transportation expenses, and other necessary academic fees (such as books and stationery). This financial strain has compelled Lebanese and Syrian children, particularly those of secondary school age, to drop out of school and enter the workforce at a young age to support their families amidst their deteriorating economic circumstances. Removed from school to contribute to their families' income, refugee children often resort to taking up precarious jobs and tasks, particularly as accessing the labor market in Lebanon proves challenging for them. Refugee children in rural areas typically find work in the agricultural sector, while those in urban settings may engage in construction work or resort to street peddling (Buckner et al., 2017).

While the economic crisis constitutes a significant barrier to accessing education in Lebanon for both vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugees, there exist additional institutional obstacles to pursuing education in Lebanon, particularly for Syrian refugee children. These obstacles include the imposition of different curricula taught in unfamiliar languages (English and French rather than Arabic), the lack or loss of refugee student certification required for official exams and other official documentation, inadequate education facilities—especially in Lebanon's overstretched public schools—and the limited absorptive capacity of existing facilities. It's unsurprising that refugees who integrate into national systems in fragile contexts often find themselves enrolling in schools that are already underserved and overcrowded (CLS, 2023; UNHCR, 2022).

Furthermore, acts of discrimination, bullying, violence, trauma, and the pervasive feeling of uncertainty caused by conflict also deter students from engaging with and continuing their education (UNESCO et al., 2015). The model of segregation in Lebanon between local and refugee students has also influenced the desire and willingness of refugee children to attend school. This model, known as the 'second-shift' model, divides teaching activities between separate sessions for Lebanese and Syrian students. Segregating refugee and Lebanese students risks exacerbating division and subjecting refugee students to lower-quality education, particularly by overburdening teachers who are required to teach two shifts (Crul et al., 2019). A comparative study of mixed and segregated classes in two areas in Lebanon, Akkar, a rural area, and Bourj Hammoud, an urban area, conducted by International Alert, found that students and parents of refugee students in segregated classes had worse perceptions of each other, along with poorer social relationships (International Alert, 2015). Additionally, the majority of Syrian students surveyed by Shuayb et al. (2014) reported experiencing physical and verbal abuse from teaching staff in Lebanese public schools. Hence, amidst this compounded crisis, school enrollment dropped from 60% in 2020-2021 to 43% in 2021-2022 (UNICEF, 2023).

Regarding Non-Formal Education (NFE) Programs established to prepare out-of-school children for a smooth transition into formal education (GoL et al., 2017), significant restrictions have been identified. While refugees who do not attend school are required to take Basic Literacy and Numeracy (BLN), numerous challenges persist in transitioning to, engaging with, and attending formal education. A significant systemic obstacle affecting the education of Out of School (OOS) Syrian refugees is the discontinuation of the Accelerated Learning Pathway (ALP) and the absence of a seamless transition process from Non-Formal Education (NFE) to Formal Education.

Rationale

While research at both global and national level has predominantly focused on primary school dropouts rather than those at the secondary level, there remains a significant gap in literature regarding the transition to secondary education within vulnerable communities facing prolonged and multiple crises. On a more technical level, secondary education in crisis contexts lacks clear definition in the literature, and few research initiatives have delved into this educational level in a thorough and sustained manner.

To address the limited availability, focus, and scope of such studies, our study aims to identify the factors influencing school dropout rates among Lebanese and Syrian refugee youth in Lebanon, with a specific focus on girls' education within these communities.

This study explores the educational and social barriers hindering the progression to secondary education among vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The objective is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by youth during their transition to secondary education and their perceptions of these barriers and the educational system as a whole. This study asks, what are the educational and social factors that vulnerable students (both Lebanese and Syrian refugees) live, and which increase or decrease their chances of achieving or completing their education? In asking this question, our research elucidates the challenges faced by youth groups and the reasons that may increase or decrease their chances of completing their education. By engaging directly with these young individuals, we aim to uncover their perspectives on available educational opportunities and potential alternative pathways to formal education.

Additionally, the study addresses the following sub-research questions:

- 1. What role (or influence) do socio-economic circumstances play in shaping adolescents' educational trajectories?**
- 2. How does the quality of education and school environment influence adolescents' decisions to continue their education or drop out?**
- 3. To what extent do peers influence adolescents' decisions to remain in school or drop out?**
- 4. What are the primary factors influencing adolescents' decisions to stay in school, including their aspirations to overcome deprivation?**
- 5. What alternative educational pathways do adolescents propose to enhance educational opportunities?**
- 6. What differences exist between boys and girls, as well as between Lebanese and Syrian adolescents, in their chosen educational paths and the factors influencing their decisions?**

II. Methodology

To address the research questions, our project team adopted a rigorous qualitative research approach, incorporating both primary and secondary data sources. Initially, a thorough desk review was conducted to identify pertinent and recent studies, research, and other literature, which served, after analysis, to bolster the project's rationale.

Moving to the fieldwork phase, the project team strategically selected four distinct regions in Lebanon—Beirut, Bekaa, South, and North—based on predetermined vulnerability criteria to ensure a representative sample. Within these regions, the team facilitated Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Lebanese and Syrian youth aged 15 to 18, encompassing both genders and including participants currently enrolled in education as well as those who have dropped out. Furthermore, the FGDs were organized according to nationality and gender to capture diverse perspectives effectively.

Participants were selected based on the following specific criteria:

- Enrollment status in school;
- Engagement in formal and non-formal education;
- Age bracket of 15-18 years;
- Segregation into male-only and female-only groups;
- Distinct nationalities (vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugees);
- Mixed educational backgrounds;
- Consideration for physical disabilities where applicable.

Focus Group Discussion Guide Development

The primary focus of the study revolves around the examination of Educational and Social Factors influencing youth schooling and dropout rates from the perspective of the youth themselves. To effectively address these issues, the research team developed a semi-structured Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide, ensuring comprehensive coverage of relevant topics during data collection.

In conceptualizing Educational and Social Factors, the team identified three key dimensions, each with its main indicators. Subsequently, a questionnaire was incorporated to gather essential demographic information from the targeted population participating in the focus groups.

The table below (Table 1) illustrates these dimensions, along with the corresponding indicators and measurement tools adopted:

Dimensions	Indicators	Only for Syrians	Tools
Family Life	1.Status (educational-social-economic)		Questionnaire
	2.Sisters and brothers (Nb, ages, work, education)		Questionnaire
	3.Housing conditions		Focus group
	4.Mother-father relationship	Migration conditions from Syria	Focus group
	5.Family members relationship		Questionnaire
	6.Youth-Parents relationship		Focus group
School life	7.Dropout and continuation		Questionnaire Focus group
	8.Curriculum and subject matters		Focus group
	9.Teachers		Focus group
	10.school climate		Focus group
Educational future	11.Students		Focus group
	12.Value of schooling		Focus group
	13.Educational alternatives		Focus group
Peers	14.Identity (Who are they?)		Focus group
	15.Places and actions		Focus group

TABLE 1. EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS DIMENSIONS, INDICATORS, AND CORRESPONDENT TOOLS

Recruiting and Training Moderators

The research team enlisted a group of eight field researchers, comprising four males and four females, representing diverse regions within Lebanon. They were selected to facilitate FGDs within their respective communities to engage participants effectively. To ensure a conducive environment for dialogue, smooth and comfortable for the young participants, female field researchers were assigned to groups of girls, while male counterparts were allocated to groups of boys.

A comprehensive training workshop spanning two days was developed by the research team to equip field researchers with the necessary skills for conducting FGDs. Furthermore, Plan International provided training to both the field research team and researchers on safeguarding measures and the prevention of sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse.

Data Collection

In each area, the field researchers conducted an extensive outreach campaign in collaboration with various NGOs and CSOs, supplemented by on-the-ground efforts to recruit a diverse pool of participants. Ahead of each FGD, the field researchers reached out to the caregivers of potential participants providing them with a comprehensive overview of the study's objectives and seeking initial permission for their sons or daughters to take part. Upon consent, parents were requested to sign a parental consent form. Subsequently, the field researchers coordinated the scheduling of FGDs, during which participants under the age of 18 were approached for their consent and asked to sign a child assent form. Conducted in Arabic, each FGD featured a facilitator alongside two note-takers to ensure accurate documentation. Additionally, quality assurance protocols were implemented to identify any facilitation challenges, enabling prompt follow-up and thereby enhancing the overall quality of the data collected. Table 2 shows the numbers of FGDs in each area distributed by nationality and gender

		Geographic Area				Total
		Beirut	Bekaa	North	South	
Nationality	Lebanese	6	4	5	4	19
	Syrian	4	6	5	6	21
Total		10	10	10	10	40

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF FGD BY GEOGRAPHIC AREA AND NATIONALITY

Data Analysis

After concluding the data collection phase, the team employed a thematic analysis methodology to discern patterns and themes within the gathered data. By comparing the findings from the FGDs with insights from the literature review, a holistic understanding of the primary areas of interest was attained.

Ethical Considerations

The protocol for this research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the American University of Beirut (Protocol #SBS-2023-0114). Throughout the fieldwork phase, no significant ethical concerns arose. Prior to their participation in the study, all interviewees, including both parents and youth, provided explicit consent. Moreover, the study adhered to several ethical considerations, including training on safeguarding, obtaining consent and assent, and ensuring the confidentiality of data storage and processing.

Limitations

Although the findings of this research do not encompass the entire demographic of the studied age group, they do shed light on critical trends and perceptions articulated by the adolescents themselves, thus addressing the main research question and sub-questions. However, it is essential to note that data collection concluded before the events of October 7. Consequently, the results do not account for subsequent developments related to internal displacement and its specific effects on education in the South of Lebanon.

At the field level, the research team encountered numerous challenges during the data collection phase, particularly in Beirut, where accessing specific sensitive areas proved difficult. These areas are renowned for their intricate political dynamics and affiliations, necessitating official authorization for entry. In response to this hurdle, the team had to identify and arrange alternative locations within Lebanon that mirrored Beirut's demographic characteristics. However, this endeavor proved time-consuming, exacerbated by low response rates from participants in these substitute areas. Similarly, organizing the last FGDs in the Bekaa region for both males and females posed significant outreach challenges. Despite these obstacles, through extensive outreach efforts and support from Plan International's partners, the research team successfully concluded the FGDs in both Beirut and the Bekaa region.

III. Findings

This section provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the youth who participated in the 40 FGDs, followed by an exposition of the themes identified through meticulous thematic analysis and coding.

A. Sample Profile

A total of forty Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted over a span of three months, with 10 discussions held in each of the designated regions. Prior to each FGD, participants were requested to complete a questionnaire and survey, encompassing inquiries about their education, parental education levels, and other demographic details. Across the various regions in Lebanon, a total of 370 questionnaires were completed by youth participants. Of the surveyed population (N=370), 179 were male, while 191 were female, with an average age of 16.2 years. Regarding nationality, Lebanese and Syrian participants were nearly evenly represented, with 176 and 184 individuals, respectively. Table 3 provides a summary of participant distribution based on nationality and gender. Geographically, the survey covered 104 participants in the North, 99 in the Bekaa region, 88 in the South, and 76 in Beirut. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that only four Syrian female participants were married and not pursuing further education.

		Nationality			Total	Age Mean
		Lebanese	Syrian	Other		
Gender	Male	97	79	2	178	16.2
	Female	79	105	2	186	16.1
Total		176	184	4	364	
Age Mean		16.2	16.1	16.1		

TABLE 3. MALE AND FEMALE DISTRIBUTION ACCORDING TO NATIONALITY

In total, over half of the surveyed population are continuing their education (55%). The percentage is slightly higher among males compared to females (57.3% versus 54.1%). However, a significant disparity exists between Syrian and Lebanese participants: 42.9% of Syrians continue their education, whereas 68.6% of Lebanese participants do so (table 4).

Gender			Nationality			Total
			Lebanese	Syrian	Other	
Male	Continuing School	Yes	58	42	2	102
		No	39	37	0	76
	Total		97	79	2	178
Female	Continuing School	Yes	62	36	1	99
		No	16	67	1	84
	Total		78	103	2	183
Total	Continuing School	Yes	120	78	3	201
		No	55	104	1	160
	Total		175	182	4	361

TABLE 4. CONTINUING EDUCATION ACCORDING TO GENDER AND NATIONALITY

The mean average of the highest education level attained by mothers is slightly higher among Lebanese individuals compared to Syrians (7.42 versus 6.27). However, the mean average of the highest education level attained by fathers is almost identical between Lebanese and Syrians: (6.50 versus 6.85) (refer to Table 5 and Table 6).

Nationality	Highest Education of the Mother		
	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Lebanese	7.42	109	2.484
Syrian	6.27	135	2.287
Other	8.67	3	0.577
Total	6.81	247	2.435

TABLE 5. HIGHEST EDUCATION OF THE MOTHER DISTRIBUTED BY NATIONALITY

Nationality	Highest Education of the Father		
	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Lebanese	6.50	117	2.706
Syrian	6.85	142	1.920
Other	6.50	2	3.536
Total	6.69	261	2.312

TABLE 6. HIGHEST EDUCATION OF THE FATHER DISTRIBUTED BY NATIONALITY

B. Thematic Analysis:

In alignment with the research's objective to identify the social and educational factors impacting school dropouts among vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugee adolescents transitioning from primary to secondary education in Lebanon, FGD sessions were structured based on the Dimensions Framework. This framework encompasses three levels of adolescents' lives: 1) Family life; 2) School life; and 3) Peer relationships. Discussion questions were formulated from indicators within each level, prompting adolescents to share their perspectives and insights on these topics.

Family Life

Family life was examined from two perspectives: economic situation and family relationships. The economic aspect delved into the financial circumstances of the family, while the latter focused on familial dynamics.

1. Economic Situation:

The segment of the focus group discussions was centered on engaging adolescents in discussions about their family's economic and social conditions. Questions in this segment aimed to elicit adolescents' experiences and perspectives regarding their family's financial status, including income, expenditures, and relationships among family members.

Impact and Consequences of Economic Situation:

Among the discussion groups, a majority (22 out of 40) characterized their family's economic situation as either "poor" or "very poor." Thirteen groups expressed mixed opinions, while a smaller minority (mentioned in 5 groups) deemed their family's economic situation as acceptable. Participants elaborated on the ramifications and consequences of their families' economic hardships on their lives.

"Don't know what to say, we are barely surviving." (North, Female Syrian Participant)

The impact of family economic hardships generally manifested in two distinct stances: "acceptance" and "complaint." The stance of "acceptance" was evident in statements such as "we are alive thanks to God's blessing," "we're coping as much as we can," "we're living day by day," and "this has been our life, there is nothing we can do." This perspective was predominant in 19 discussions, forming the majority of responses. Conversely, individuals who expressed dissatisfaction with the economic situation primarily voiced objections regarding insufficient income and heightened financial difficulties. This sentiment was raised in 16 discussions.

“Thank God for everything, we have always lived like that, we got used to bad situation and here in Tibbaneh, most of the people live in hardship. We learned to say thank God.” (North, Male Lebanese Participant)

“My mother started working to help my father by taking two jobs, one in sewing and another one in selling bags on top of working at home.” (Bekaa, Female Lebanese Participant)

Furthermore, the impact of economic hardship on the lives of adolescent boys and girls was elucidated through their shared experiences, encapsulated in three distinct forms: 1) Deprivation and poverty; 2) Educational consequences; and 3) Other challenges. It's worth noting that 15 out of 40 groups refrained from participating in the discussion regarding the impact of economic hardships on their lives. This abstention could stem from initial reluctance to engage in open discussion or a sense of embarrassment regarding personal vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, findings indicate that the vast majority of groups (17 out of 25) who did participate in this discussion expressed an intensified sense of deprivation and dispossession, with notable emphasis from Lebanese boys' groups. The second most prominent impact pertained to educational consequences, manifested in adolescents' inclination towards dropping out of school or altering their educational pursuits, as mentioned in 8 group discussions.

“Most of the children had to dropout from school because of lack of income, Parents had to choose food over school.” (Bekaa, Female Syrian Participants)

An additional educational repercussion was highlighted by a Lebanese girls' group, who discussed the constraints imposed by the high cost of education. This financial burden compelled them to forgo their preferred educational paths in favor of specialties with lower costs. Moreover, six out of 25 discussion groups raised various other consequences, albeit of lesser weight. These included the adverse effects of their families' poor economic situation on their overall well-being, psychological needs, and heightened feelings of isolation. Additionally, some groups voiced concerns about the decrease in humanitarian aid, particularly among Syrian refugee groups. Both Lebanese and Syrian groups also cited challenges in accessing healthcare services, as well as the dearth of livelihood and employment opportunities.

Economic Situation and Coping Measures:

Furthermore, adolescents reflected on their lived economic circumstances and the coping mechanisms adopted by themselves and their families to navigate economic hardship. From their accounts, four main coping measures emerged: 1) Working to provide additional income; 2) Receiving aid; 3) Borrowing money from others; 4) Rationing and reducing expenses.

“It breaks my heart to see that my father cannot afford to provide for my younger siblings. I am almost 18 years old and still don't own a mobile. My life is between work and home only.” (North, Male Lebanese Participant)

“We're forced to borrow money to procure our basic needs in terms of food and medicine.” (Bekaa, Male Syrian Participant)

More than half of the groups cited working to support their families in income generation as their primary coping mechanism, mentioned in a total of 27 discussions. This was the most prevalent coping measure, embraced nearly equally by adolescent boys and girls, with a slight increase among Lebanese groups by 3 discussion groups. Meanwhile, relying on aid and borrowing money from others constituted the second most prevalent coping measures, mentioned in 14 and 13 discussion groups, respectively. The dependence on aid was slightly more prominent among Syrian refugee groups, while borrowing money appeared to be adopted by all groups of boys and girls. Similarly, the least adopted measure, related to rationing and reducing expenses, was cited in only 4 discussions.

2. Family Relationships:

The adolescents were initially prompted to discuss family relationships in general and elaborate on the dynamics between parents and siblings¹. Their responses were categorized into two main clusters:

(1) Views on the overall relationships among family members; and (2) Specific dynamics between parents and siblings. While all adolescent groups were responsive and actively participated in sharing their views on overall family bonds, only 14 out of 40 groups engaged in discussing specific relationship dynamics between parents and siblings. Adolescents showed high responsiveness when discussing the overall family bond but exhibited lower responsiveness when addressing tensions or conflicts within family relationships.

Overall Family Relationships:



Upon delving deeper into the relationships among family members, solidarity emerged as the most cited aspect, appearing in 31 discussions. The sense of family solidarity was highly prevalent in adolescents' descriptions of family relationships, manifested in various terms and expressions such as respect, love, kindness, connection, understanding, care, sharing, and obedience.

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“There is nothing that can separate us. Even in the middle of war and shells, we didn’t have any family problems or tension.” (North, Male Lebanese Participant)

“Our relationship is based on respect and love. Our Father is our friend. However, the obedience of parents is obligatory and each member has to comply with his duties.” (South, Male Lebanese Participant)

Obedience was specifically highlighted six times, equally by Lebanese and Syrian boys and girls, within the context of demonstrating undeniable respect for parents. This obedience also indicated the near absence of rebellious attitudes among the majority of adolescents, despite minor conflicts and disputes with their parents. For this group, conflicts were primarily trivial and momentary, often stemming from disagreements and differing opinions, which were typically justified due to the tension resulting from challenging living circumstances, as cited in 23 discussions. A minority group of adolescents (10 out of 40 groups), with a slight emphasis from girls (9 discussions by girls versus 7 by boys), mentioned that their families' worsening economic situation had impacted overall family relationships. This impact led to toxicity within family dynamics due to increased stress, tension, disputes, shouting, and verbal violence.

Specific Relationship Dynamics



From the discussions, four main ideas emerged regarding the specific relationship between parents and siblings: i) Good relationship; ii) Discriminative treatment between boys and girls; iii) Conflicts between parents and some angry boys; iv) Absence of communication or connection between parents and siblings.

¹ In reference to Question #2

Of the 14 engaged groups, 7, primarily boys, described the relationship between their parents and siblings as good, using terms such as friendship, joyfulness, acceptance, understanding of the father's difficult temperament, and obedience. Additionally, tension between enraged boys and their parents was mentioned in 5 discussions, mostly by Syrian groups. The discriminative treatment between boys and girls was mainly brought up by girls' groups in 4 discussions, attributing it to larger social norms that influenced parental behavior towards daughters. The lack of communication and connection between parents and siblings was mentioned in three diverse discussion groups.

In elaborating on the family life and as a follow-up on the previous question which focused on their siblings, the adolescents were asked about their personal relationships with their parents and siblings². Most adolescent groups were responsive when discussing their direct relationships with parents (35 out of 40 groups), while only 14 groups engaged in discussing relationships with siblings. These discussions allowed adolescents to contemplate their own experiences, compare, and identify defining aspects of their relationships with parents and siblings.

Responses revealed similarities with the previous discussion about parent-sibling relationships. In both cases, relationships with parents were defined by two main aspects with the same order of importance: a) good relationships, and b) conflicts. However, adolescents articulated distinctive aspects and additional details:

In describing good relationships with parents, a strong sense of gratitude was highlighted, reflected in statements like "worship and respect for parents," "the great support and guidance of the parents," and "trust and appreciation." This aspect was most cited, appearing in 28 out of 35 discussion groups, with a notable emphasis from Syrian boys' groups (25 Syrian boys versus 22 Lebanese Boys, and 26 boys' groups versus 21 girls' groups).

"I worship my parents, and will not add to their worries. It's enough what they are going through." (North, Female Lebanese Participant)

The more contentious aspect of adolescents' relationships with their parents revolved around conflicts and disagreements, as mentioned in 17 diverse discussions. However, when discussions attempted to delve into the reasons behind these conflicts, only 7 out of 40 groups were responsive. Apart from instances of refusing to help at home (cited by 2 Syrian boys' groups), no single dominant or direct reason emerged. Instead, various secondary reasons were provided, covering a range of challenges related to the overall unstable security situation (mentioned by one Syrian boys' group), the deteriorating economic situation (cited in 2 discussions by Lebanese and Syrian boys and girls), and societal pressures (cited by two Lebanese girls' groups).

"I fight more with my father who thinks I am a loser because every time I take a job, I end up quitting. He asks me to be more patient." (Beirut, Male Lebanese Participant)

Another notable aspect that emerged in 16 discussions was adolescents' preference for one parent over the other, with the mother often being viewed as more approachable, patient, and understanding of her children's needs. Regarding the nature of relationships with siblings, the majority of the 14 groups (out of 40) who participated in this discussion revealed experiencing conflicts with their siblings. This viewpoint was expressed in 11 discussions, either referring to common sibling fights or disagreements, or complaints about the dominance of older brothers who control their choices and movements, particularly voiced by adolescent girls, especially among Syrian groups. Conversely, the opposing viewpoint, highlighting a state of harmony and accord with siblings, emerged as a counter-feature and was mentioned 8 times in total among the 14 groups.

² In reference to Question #3

“We fight my elder brother and I, and then we reconcile as usual.”

(Beirut, Male Lebanese Participant)

Before ending the first part of the group discussions on “Family Life”, the adolescent boys and girls were asked a last question about the positions of their parents vis-à-vis attending school³. Two groups only (out of 40), abstained from answering, while the overwhelming response that resulted from the majority of the 38 groups showcased the strong parents’ encouragement and support for their children’s school education and attendance which appeared in 36 discussions. In some cases, the parents went as far as exerting threats and pressure on their children to stay in school as mentioned in 14 other discussion groups. The opposing parents’ positions which was reflected in either accepting the school dropout of their children, or showing no resistance to it, appeared only in the course of 7 discussions with a notable majority among the Syrian groups.

Despite the encouragement of parents for their children’s school attendance, the adolescent boys and girls attributed school drop out to four main reasons presented in frequency order:

a. Family reasons were closely linked to economic factors and were mentioned in 17 discussions. These discussions highlighted cases of families unable to afford school tuition, supplies, and transportation, or having to prioritize purchasing medicine and food over school expenses. Consequently, adolescents, mostly boys (equally Syrians and Lebanese), dropped out of school to help their families and generate income. In some instances, adolescent boys were compelled to leave school and assume the provider role when the father was absent or deceased. One Syrian girls' group cited prioritizing the education of younger siblings as a reason for school dropout, while helping with housework was mentioned by both Lebanese and Syrian girls, particularly if the mother was employed (cited in 2 groups). Although early marriage was mentioned in only 7 group discussions by Syrian girls as a reason for school dropout, it appeared that girls tended to give up on school due to submission and hopelessness in facing the harsh living circumstances they were enduring.

“I am pregnant, I have a little boy and I am working in order to survive and help my family survive” (North, Female Syrian Participant)

“Girls reach grade 7 and then stop. They say why bother since I will end up doing dishes. But this shouldn’t be the case.” (Bekaa, Female Lebanese Participant)

b. The educational reasons, which emerged in 17 discussions, were associated with various factors: school closures, teachers' strikes and absenteeism, difficulty in accessing schools due to proximity and lack of transportation, challenges in registering for schools due to missing official documents, poor quality of education in schools, and feelings of failure and lack of self-confidence in the ability to continue and succeed in education.

c. The preference to learn a vocation appeared in 3 discussions of boys' groups and was mainly a result of the combined two above reasons. On one hand, there was a perception of the uselessness of school education due to its irrelevance and poor quality; on the other hand, economic hardship and the increased cost of living were factors in opting for a practical pathway and seeking a vocation that could help adolescents earn an income.

“I have a goal to study vocational education and build my life.”

(North, Female Lebanese Participant)

d. The consequences of the Syrian displacement appeared in 3 discussions and referred to the cumulative learning losses due to displacement, followed by the inability to register in schools due to official paper requirements, and the extended school age gap, which led many Syrian adolescents to give up on school education.

³ In reference to Question #4

Summary on Gender and Syrian Refugees cross-cutting themes

While most accounts were evenly divided among boys and girls from both Lebanese and Syrian refugee groups, some specific variances were noticed at a regional and gender level, as well as among Syrian adolescent groups.

Economically, the majority of adolescent boys and girls from both Lebanese and Syrian groups acknowledged a deterioration in their overall economic situation. However, a smaller group of adolescents in Beirut perceived the economic situation to be bearable, while those in the North faced the most severe circumstances, along with Syrian adolescent groups whose vulnerability was more acute, especially concerning housing, ease of movement, livelihood opportunities, and access to services, including health. Working to support families with income was the most prevalent coping mechanism among both boys and girls. Additionally, girls were often pushed to stay home to save on educational costs and support with housework and caregiving for younger siblings.

At the family level, the vast majority of Lebanese and Syrian adolescent boys and girls expressed strong support from their parents and family solidarity. However, girls seemed to experience a mix of increased empowerment and awareness of their rights to voice their opinions and pursue education, while still succumbing to social norms and responsibilities exacerbated by deteriorating security and economic circumstances. This impact was most evident among Syrian adolescent girls.

“For me I don’t like when my parents impose their opinions even if they tend to be controlling. I like also to be able to express my opinion freely and be heard.” (Bekaa, Female Syrian Participant)

School Life

School life was addressed from three different angles. First, adolescents who were still enrolled in school were asked about the main factors that helped them pursue their education, while those who had dropped out were asked about the main factors that led them to leave school. Second, the adolescent groups discussed and shared their views specifically on the quality of their school education and the school environment. Finally, they were asked to reflect on and share their favorite school memories as well as their views on the value of education.

1. Factors Affecting the Adolescents’ School Continuation or Dropout

The second part of the group discussions addressed the school life of adolescent boys and girls⁴. Questions aimed to engage the adolescents in sharing their experiences and understanding of the factors that contributed to either leaving school or staying in school. To initiate the discussions, adolescents who were out of school were asked, "Why did you leave school?"⁵

- a. **For those who left school:** The findings from 35 out of 40 discussion groups (five abstained) were closely aligned with the adolescents' inputs in the previous discussion regarding school dropout and its reasons. However, in this discussion, adolescents provided more elaborations and nuances on the following four reasons leading to school dropout:
 - i. **Family reasons** were the most dominant, appearing in 31 discussions and often overlapping with economic reasons, indicating overall family vulnerability. Some adolescents vaguely attributed this to the country's economic crisis, while others were more specific about the impact of household economic vulnerability on their choices and lives.

⁴ In reference to Question #5

⁵ In reference to the sampling data, 163 adolescents out of the total 368 participants, were out of schools divided between 87 girls and 76 boys, and between 103 Syrian, 55 Lebanese and 3 from other nationality.

This led many adolescent boys to leave school to support their families or due to inability to afford educational costs. The level of vulnerability and poverty was particularly acute in the North area, significantly impacting adolescents' school life and dropout for both boys and girls. For girls, family reasons included the need to support with domestic work and care for younger siblings. In some cases, girls left school to allow younger siblings to enroll instead. Early marriage was also mentioned as a family pressure to leave school. However, it was not among the most common coping mechanisms, as it was only mentioned by 7 Syrian girls' groups and mainly associated with socio-cultural norms. Girls were often led to give up on school mainly due to deteriorating living circumstances and increased poverty, leading to a sense of surrender and hopelessness, especially in the North area.

“The whole economic and psychological situation is not well. My parents can’t even think of education anymore. Of course, I will leave school. How can we go to school and be able to learn when our stomachs are empty?”

(North, Female Lebanese Participant)

“My mother works and I have to stay home to take care of my younger siblings and clean the house.” (Beirut, Female Lebanese Participant)

“My parents started introducing me to potential candidates for marriage because I am old enough now to have a family for my own.” (North, Female Syrian Participant)

ii. **Reasons related to the schools** were numerous, appearing in 28 discussions and covering several issues. Access to school was hindered by the far distance of schools, especially in the absence of transportation, and by the lack of security on the road, particularly for students attending the second shift. The repeated closures of schools, teachers' absenteeism, and strikes also affected the adolescents' retention. Regarding the quality of education, adolescents expressed frustration with the conduct and treatment of teachers, who were perceived as alienating and sometimes harsh, and who cared less about their well-being and needs. This frustration was intensified by the difficulty of the curriculum and the adolescents' increased sense of failure and lack of self-confidence in the absence of educational guidance or counseling. Moreover, peer pressure and a discouraging school environment tainted with neglect, chaos, discrimination, and violence all acted as significant barriers to the adolescents' school continuation.

“The school is very far; the roads are not safe and there is a lot of harassment. So, I left school”. (North, Female Syrian Participant)

“Since teachers strikes, I left school and started working and never went back to school. I forgot what I learned all because of the strikes.”

(North, Male Lebanese Participant)

“I cannot understand anything especially that the teachers were barely explaining anything and always shouting and hitting us instead.” (North, Male Lebanese Participant)

“Schools here are bad. I reached grade 5 and still don’t know how to read. So, I left school.” (North, Male Lebanese Participant)

“I regret having the friends I had because that pushed me to leave school.”

(Beirut, Male Lebanese Participant)

iii. **Personal reasons** were among the least cited reasons but reflected a mix of motivations captured in 6 discussions. Some adolescents mentioned a lack of interest in pursuing education because they didn't enjoy studying. Others, particularly boys, expressed their personal inclinations and preference for practical education that could secure income, such as learning a vocation or starting their own project or business from an early age. For this group, the motivation for choosing a vocational pathway stemmed from a combination of family and school-related reasons. The perception of outdated school education and increased economic hardship led many adolescents to seek a more lucrative pathway.

"I took that decision because I couldn't keep up between school and work."

(Beirut, Male Lebanese Participant)

"I want to continue education until grade 9 in order to learn a vocation and start working." (North, Male Syrian Participant)

iv. **Displacement**, previously discussed (as mentioned above), was briefly reiterated in 6 discussion groups, highlighting the consequences of the war in Syria on the education of many Syrian displaced adolescents. These adolescents lost opportunities to enroll in schools due to various challenges, including lack of security, absence of official papers, school-age gap, differences in curriculum and language of instruction, discrimination, and lack of permission to register in schools and receive certification.

"The security problems and the fear from getting arrested especially on our way to school is our biggest issue." (Bekaa, Male Syrian Participant)

"We all want to learn but we're not able. Our parents want us to be educated but because of the war we couldn't and the educational costs are too high." (Bekaa, Female Syrian Participant)

In continuation of the discussion on school life, a follow-up question was addressed to the adolescents who were still attending school⁶: "What are the factors that helped you stay in school?" This question aimed to better understand the factors that enabled these adolescents to remain in school despite various challenges, especially economic hardship, which was cited by the majority of the groups as the most overwhelming situation they were enduring.

b. **For those who chose to stay in school:** The accounts from 38 adolescent groups who responded to this question (with only 2 abstaining) highlighted two principal factors that helped the adolescents continue attending school and pursue their education: i) personal incentives; and ii) the support and encouragement of parents. A third factor of lesser importance was also mentioned, attributed to the provision of necessary conditions that allowed adolescents to attend school, such as access to free schooling and receiving aid to cover transportation. Other factors mentioned, though not of significant weight, were still noteworthy, such as motivation to continue studying abroad or to study in order to leave the country.

i. **Personal Incentives.** The personal incentives were mentioned in 31 out of 38 discussion groups, with nearly equal distribution among groups of Lebanese and Syrian boys and girls. According to the adolescents, personal incentives encompassed multiple qualities, such as having faith and determination, enthusiastic ambition, commitment to hard work, resilience, and the ability to face and adapt to challenges. They also included a passion for learning and self-development, as well as the aspiration to acquire certified education for a better future. Additionally, personal incentives involved having a long-term vision and the will to achieve social mobility, attain higher social status, and secure a respectable job. There was also a strong sense of duty and loyalty towards their parents, aiming to support them and improve their living circumstances, while also expressing gratitude for their parents' sacrifices. For girls, a personal incentive for pursuing education was specifically related to becoming self-independent and liberated from men's financial control and authority. For Syrian adolescents, personal incentives for pursuing education also included the goal of returning to Syria one day and contributing to its rebuilding.

⁶ Of the 368 total participants, 102 girls and 103 boys were attending schools, 123 are Lebanese, 78 Syrian and 4 from other nationalities.

“I want to continue education but my parents cannot afford it and it breaks my heart to see my parents suffering for me. That’s why I decided to study in the morning and work at night because I don’t want to leave school and deceive them.” (North, Male Lebanese Participant)

“I work during the summer to save money for my school and sometimes I work during the day because school starts at 1.00 pm.” (North, Male Syrian Participant)

“I used to struggle with the math subject. So, I used you-tube to learn on my own.”
(Bekaa, Male Lebanese Participant)

“My dreams helped me pursue my education.” (Beirut, Female Lebanese Participant)

- ii. **Support and Encouragement of Parents.** The second most prevalent response from the adolescents highlighted the high importance of their parents’ support in influencing their school attendance and retention. This factor was cited in 30 out of 38 discussions, with a slightly greater emphasis from girls’ groups. Describing the strong encouragement of their parents, the adolescents pointed to several factors that elucidated their parents’ behavior and the driving force behind their dedicated support. For many adolescents, their parents’ strong backing stemmed from their own regrets about not having acquired or completed an education, which became a major drive for insisting on their children’s education to ensure they have a better future. Some parents were inflexible and rigid regarding school attendance, while others showed support by incentivizing and praising their children for pursuing education and opportunities to travel outside the country. Parents’ support was also evident in supporting their daughters’ education even after marriage. Additionally, in some cases, girls’ school attendance was supported because of the presence of their brothers accompanying them.

“My parents keep on encouraging me to stay in school to become well respected and valued in the society in my future.” (North, Female Lebanese Participant)

“Education is a red line for my parents because they want the best for us.” (Beirut, Female, Lebanese Participant)

“My parents tell us we need to study in order to travel and help them in the future because there is no hope in Lebanon.” (Bekaa, Female Lebanese Participant)

“My mother says we have nothing in life but our education. Whatever happens, we need to continue our education.” (Bekaa, Female Lebanese Participant)

- iii. **Provision of the necessary conditions.** The last factor, which appeared in 18 out of 38 discussions, was related to the provision of essential conditions that facilitate school accessibility, such as free tuition, school capacity, wash and heating services, and proximity to schools. Additional conditions included the positive influence of good peer friendships on adolescents to continue attending schools, as well as aid provided by humanitarian organizations to cover school expenses and transportation. For Syrian groups, essential conditions also included the provision of BLN and YBLN education for out-of-school Syrian refugees.

“Our school transport was covered by an NGO, that’s why my parents allowed me to go to school with my brothers.” (North, Female Syrian Participant)

“My friends and I were encouraging each other to take BLN at the Social Movement NGO.”
(Beirut, Male Syrian Participant)

2. Quality of Education in Schools

After discussing the factors influencing their school attendance, adolescents were prompted to reflect on the quality of education in their schools and those they used to attend⁷. This question intended to further examine the perceptions of the adolescents about the quality of education and how they define it. The responses from 38 out of 40 groups were nearly evenly split between two opposing viewpoints: a) poor quality of education; and b) good quality of education.

a. The first viewpoint, suggesting that the quality of education in schools is poor, was expressed in a total of 36 discussions. Among these, four were by Lebanese boys who deemed the quality of education in their schools as very bad. Overall, there were no discernible differences between the perceptions of Lebanese and Syrian groups, nor between boys and girls, regarding this viewpoint.

The adolescents who perceived the quality of education as bad elaborated on their reasons for this opinion, stating four main reasons in the following order of importance:

i. Poor teaching emerged as the primary factor contributing to the poor quality of education, highlighted in 33 out of 38 group discussions. This deficiency primarily stemmed from a shortage of proficient and seasoned educators, coupled with the adoption of outdated and irrelevant pedagogical approaches. Additionally, disheartened and demotivated teachers, who failed to offer adequate support or explanations and displayed indifference towards their students' learning, further exacerbated the issue.

"Teachers still use outdated methods and don't know how to explain. Beating is their language." (Bekaa, Male Syrian Participant)

"What quality are you talking about? Half of the students in school don't know how to read and write. They're still at the primary level and yet they keep on passing the year. I learned reading and writing by phone on my own." (North, Male Syrian Participant)

ii. Poor school management, cited in 24 out of 38 discussions, emerged as another significant factor contributing to the decline in educational quality, as it contributed to the erosion of the school environment and academic standards, particularly exacerbated by ongoing strikes and interruptions.

iii. Difficult and outdated curriculum was highlighted in 15 out of 38 discussions. Criticisms included its failure to meet students' needs and interests, inadequate provision of online and remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, and weaknesses in key subjects like English and technology. Syrian groups, in 8 out of 15 discussions, specifically noted the added difficulty of comprehending the curriculum compared to that in Syria, primarily due to instruction in a foreign language.

iv. Other reasons were mentioned, primarily concerning inadequate infrastructure, such as overcrowded classrooms and insufficient school capacity, as well as deficient school services, including inadequate heating and cooling systems.

⁷ In reference to Question #7

b. The opposing viewpoint, deeming that the quality of education is good, emerged in 33 group discussions, with a slightly stronger representation from the Syrian groups. Those who perceived the quality of education positively cited similar arguments to those who viewed it negatively, albeit with a slight difference in the order of importance given to their arguments. In this perspective, the quality of teaching was paramount and featured in 20 discussions out of 33, notably highlighted by 12 groups, particularly girls, who emphasized its significance based on their experiences. However, the second most crucial reason, mentioned in 14 discussions, was attributed to the curriculum rather than the quality of school management, which garnered mention in 12 discussions. To sum up, the reasons behind a good quality of education were attributed to the following main factors:

i. Good teaching was associated with the qualifications of the teachers, who offer clear explanations and consistent support to their students. Additionally, it was linked to the conduct of teachers, who treat their students with respect and empathy.

“The teachers are competent in the subject they teach and they help students overcome their weaknesses.” (Bekaa, Male Syrian Participant)

“There is a kind relationship between the teachers and the students which helps us learn better.” (South, Male Lebanese Participant)

“I will never forget those teachers who did their best to explain the lessons by showing us videos on the phone and organized some activities for us to make us feel good.” (North, Female Lebanese)

ii. Good curriculum was frequently mentioned when adolescents had no comprehension issues or difficulty to understand the different subjects, and it overlapped sometimes with the ability of the teachers to simplify the curriculum. It was also praised when special attention was given to teaching English language, and when extra-curricular activities were offered to the adolescents.

iii. Good school management typically emerged in the absence of specific complaints about it. It primarily revolved around the leadership style of school principals, who were depicted as responsive and attentive to the needs of students, as well as diligent in maintaining the school facilities.

3. The Schools' Environment

The above discussions lead to questions about the school environment⁸. The responses unveiled two contrasting perspectives, each garnering significant attention. Approximately half of the groups expressed a belief that the school environment was poor, bordering on extremely unfavorable, particularly evident in the North area, as highlighted in 33 out of 39 discussions. Conversely, the remaining half contended that the school environment was positive, a sentiment echoed in 32 other group discussions. Furthermore, these discussions provided an opportunity for adolescents to expound upon and justify their viewpoints by outlining the factors influencing the school environment.

⁸ In reference to Question #8

a. The groups who viewed that the school environment was poor or extremely poor described the school environment using terms such as “ugly”, “dangerous”, “repulsive”, “prison” and “horrible” among others. The reasons for this perception were attributed to three different factors listed in the following order of importance:

i. Poor school climate was a sentiment expressed in 29 out of 32 discussions. This aspect was closely intertwined with ineffective school management, fostering an atmosphere marked by chaos, recklessness, and a pervasive lack of safety. Incidents of violence, substance abuse, and the exchange of weapons, particularly among male students, were notably prevalent, especially in the North. Additionally, inadequate school management translated into authoritarian and oppressive leadership from school principals, who disregarded student needs and grievances. This neglect facilitated a culture of bullying and discrimination, targeting students based on gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status. Consequently, the school climate was tainted with feelings of humiliation and alienation among the student body.

“It’s like a prison. We have no right to voice our opinion or say a word.”
(Bekaa, Male Lebanese Participant)

“My school is a real massacre. It is filled with drugs, fights and knives. I used to like education. They made me hate school.” (North, Male Lebanese Participant)

“It’s a total chaos, no control and no discipline. It doesn’t feel like a school.”
(North, Female Lebanese Participant)

“There is a lot of physical and verbal violence.” (Bekaa, Male Lebanese Participant)

ii. Bad teachers were the second significant factor contributing to the negative school environment, a concern raised in 26 out of 32 discussions. These “bad teachers” were characterized by their lack of empathy, often resorting to harsh and severe treatment of students. They displayed a disregard for student needs and paid little attention to their well-being, sometimes resorting to verbal and physical violence as a means of discipline.

“My geography teacher hit me because I didn’t finish my exercise in 30 minutes.”
(South, Female Syrian Participant)

iii. Bad students/peers emerged as a recurring factor impacting the school environment negatively, appearing in 15 discussions. This primarily alluded to male students known for their involvement in drug-related and violent activities, bullying, harassment, as well as exerting influence on others to drop out of school.

“Students in schools are basically gangs.” (South, Male Syrian Participant)

b. The groups who viewed that the environment of their schools was good used terms such as “beautiful,” “pleasant,” “respectful,” “enjoyable,” and “conducive to learning” to characterize their schools’ climate. Among them, the primary factor contributing to a positive school environment, raised in 24 out of 28 discussions, was attributed to teachers who demonstrated respect and care for their students, providing support and encouragement for their educational pursuits. Additionally, in 19 discussions, the presence of supportive, caring, and enjoyable peers was emphasized as the second most crucial factor. This point was reiterated when adolescents reminisced about school memories, highlighting the enjoyable times spent with peers, particularly during extracurricular activities. Lastly, school management’s role in maintaining control, discipline, and accountability, while fostering a safe, friendly, and peaceful environment, was highlighted in 12 discussions. This included providing extracurricular activities, school celebrations, and trips that allowed students to forge meaningful relationships with their peers.

“Our relationship with our teachers was beautiful, they were so supportive and caring to us” (Beirut, Female Syrian Participant)

“When the climate in the classroom is so nice, you start loving going to school.” (Beirut, Female Syrian Participant)

4. Schools Memories ¹—

In the ongoing discussion about school environments, adolescents were prompted to recall memorable instances from their schools, excluding those related to studies and education⁹. Responses from adolescents were divided between positive and negative memories, with a greater number of groups (38) sharing positive memories compared to those discussing negative memories (24).

Positive memories were predominant, with adolescents in 32 discussions highlighting the cherished friendships and enjoyable moments spent with school peers. These moments included chatting, sharing secrets, discussing love stories, engaging in minor misbehaviors, and plotting conspiracies, as well as occasional escapades from school. Furthermore, in 35 discussions, adolescents reminisced about the joyous experiences of participating in extracurricular activities, school celebrations, events, and trips. These activities not only facilitated stronger bonds among peers but also fostered connections with teachers and the entire school community. Additionally, good teachers who treated adolescents with respect, care, and support, leaving a lasting impression on their best school memories, were mentioned in 14 discussions.

Conversely, groups with negative school memories predominantly recalled the problems and troubles they encountered in their school environments. These included instances of school fights, quarrels, violence, bullying, mistreatment by teachers, and overall ineffective management, as discussed in 15 out of 24 discussions. Other negative memories, mentioned in 9 discussions, were associated with experiencing insecurity and instability in schools due to broader societal issues such as armed conflicts in El Jebel and Tibbaneh in the North area, as well as in the South, the social movement of 2019, extended school closures, and teachers' strikes. An additional negative memory, brought up in 3 discussions, highlighted the anxiety and tension stemming from difficulties understanding the school curriculum and fear of failure in exams.

“The school trips, the end of year celebrations and the fun time with the peers are the most beautiful school memories.” (North, Male Lebanon Participant)

“The most memorable times were when our teachers engaged us in sport, music and school celebration activities” (Bekaa, Male Syrian Participant)

“No beautiful memories, I only remember the hitting with the ruler, the fights, and the cursing in schools” (North, Female Syrian Participant)

“I remember how we used to hide from the bullets and shells on our way back home.” (North, Male Lebanon Participant)

⁹ In reference to Question #9

5. Meaning and Value of Education

Discussions surrounding school life prompted an open question about the significance and value of education: "What does education mean to you, and what is the value of education for you?"¹⁰ This inquiry aimed to provoke deeper reflections among adolescents regarding the purpose of education and its relevance to their lives and realities today. The robust engagement of adolescents with this question was evident in the responses of all 40 groups, with an overwhelming consensus affirming the importance and value of education. Of these, 32 discussions firmly asserted the indisputable importance of education, while 8 reflected mixed views, with some debating the utility and worthiness of education. It's noteworthy that the groups expressing mixed views about the value of education primarily consisted of Lebanese boys' groups.

For the majority of groups, the paramount reason for believing in the importance and value of education was the conviction that education can secure or lead to a better future and life on two levels, as articulated in 37 discussions. Firstly, adolescents expressed confidence that education can foster personal growth by enhancing their knowledge and skills, leading to self-fulfillment and pride in their achievements. However, educational aspirations varied among adolescents, with some viewing education mainly as a means to acquire basic literacy skills for functional daily tasks, such as understanding medical prescriptions or navigating streets and signage. Others regarded education as essential for future family life, intending to avoid repeating the educational shortcomings of their parents and recognizing its role in shaping mentalities and perceptions, particularly in an evolving technological landscape. On a societal level, adolescents highlighted education as a pathway to accessing better employment opportunities and achieving socio-economic status. They viewed education as a means to transcend their current circumstances, gain acceptance in society, and attain social mobility.

"Education is the way to build ourselves, develop our personalities and become self-fulfilled. It is the source of strength and resilience." (South, Female Syrian Participant)

"Education is very important because it is the pathway for a higher social status and position." (North, Male Lebanese Participant)

Another noteworthy aspect revealed by adolescents was the association of education with girls' empowerment and independence, particularly emphasized in 11 discussions among girls' groups, with a slight emphasis from Syrian groups. Education was often depicted as "the weapon" for girls' protection and liberation from subjugation to familial authority and dependence on family or a husband, especially in the case of divorced girls. It served as an emancipatory tool, not only shielding girls from early marriage but also enabling them to assert ownership over their choices and decisions. Additionally, in 9 discussions, adolescents expressed a strong sense of responsibility towards their families, translating into dedication and commitment to improving their families' future and economic situations through education and personal achievement. Furthermore, in 5 discussions, adolescents expressed profound regret for leaving school, feeling they had missed out on life's opportunities as a result.

"Education is the best weapon for girls." (North, Female Syrian Participant)
"I regret so much leaving school." (Bekaa, Male Lebanese Participant)

¹⁰ In reference to Question #10

The perception of the 8 groups that considered education as useless (8 out of 8) revealed a lack of faith in its value and a cynical view toward its relevance and quality, which was deemed obsolete. Some adolescents elaborated that while education may be beneficial in general, particularly in European countries, it has become futile in Lebanon, as it fails to make any discernible difference or bring about improvement in their lives. Others emphasized that pursuing a lucrative job that provides income and vocational skills is more worthwhile than investing in an education that they perceive as leading nowhere.

"Work today is more useful at these difficult times, but we cannot say that education is not important. We're just saying that, because of the realities we are living today." (North, Male Lebanon Participant)

"I prefer to learn things that are useful and help me earn money faster, instead of struggling with school education and end up with no job." (North, Male Syrian Participant)

"In my opinion nor the education nor the school degree bring us money. We need to learn how to think for ourselves and make money." (Beirut, Male Lebanese Participant)

6. Alternative Educational Models ¹

The discussions about school life concluded with a final question about adolescents' views on alternative educational models or programs they find more effective or appealing¹¹. Two main ideas emerged from this discussion. The first idea, evident in 25 discussion groups out of 37, centered on adolescents' dissatisfaction with the traditional, theoretical curriculum and didactic teaching methods that emphasize rote learning and memorization. Adolescents expressed frustration with an approach that fails to address their individual preferences and potentials, instead employing a standard "one-size-fits-all" approach regardless of their aspirations or strengths and weaknesses. They advocated for a shift towards an improved, interactive teaching approach that prioritizes practical, hands-on learning experiences, including group work and projects. Many adolescents emphasized the importance of digital literacy and e-learning, praising hybrid approaches that accommodate their learning pace and needs. Additionally, they highlighted the need for youth activities, art, and sports clubs in schools.

"We wish our learning is more engaging and related to our life rather than learning my memorization." (South, Male Syrian Participant)

"Today it's the age of technology. Mobile phone is the best way to learn at our own pace. There is so much content on Instagram and you-tube is like an encyclopedia." (North, Female Lebanese Participant)

"We need more practical education that connects between theory and practice." (North, Male Lebanese Participant)

The second idea, reflected in 24 discussion groups out of 37, centered on the non-formal education pathway, which offers adolescents training and courses on various relevant subjects such as English, robotics, digital skills, and entrepreneurship. Vocational education, in particular, garnered attention because of its association with livelihood and income-generating opportunities, which emerged as a key motivation for adolescents

¹¹ In reference to Question #11

“Vocational training and entrepreneurship are very useful alternative education,”
(South, Male Lebanese Participant)

“The workshops and trainings are useful, they help develop our personalities as well.” (Bekaa, Female Syrian Participant)

Summary on Gender and Syrian Refugees Cross-Cutting Themes

Overall, the group discussions on adolescents' school lives revealed no significant differences between Lebanese and Syrian adolescent boys and girls. They all appeared to share similar educational experiences and viewpoints regarding the quality of education, school environment, and the value of education. However, certain situations were highlighted by the girls' groups and specific circumstances applied to the Syrian adolescent groups, which are worth noting.

The strong parental support for their children's continued education was notably emphasized in the girls' accounts. In some cases, parents were mentioned to encourage their daughters to pursue education even after marriage. Additionally, a factor specifically contributing to girls' pursuit of education was the increasing desire for self-independence and liberation from men's financial control and authority.

“Education is essential for the future of girls and their security especially if they get divorced, they will be able to find a job and be self-dependent.” (South, Female Lebanese Participant)

Among the Syrian refugee groups, several factors emerged as significant challenges affecting their school education. One major issue was the lack of clarity and consistent registration regulations, along with the continuous demand for official papers. For adolescents who experienced extended school interruptions, the Basic Literacy and Numeracy (BLN) and Youth Basic Literacy and Numeracy (YBLN) programs offered in the non-formal education sector were found to be restrictive in terms of learning continuity and lacked a clear educational pathway. For those still attending school, difficulties accessing education arose due to a lack of support for transportation and educational expenses, as well as increased insecurity, particularly during second-shift classes in winter. Bullying and discrimination in schools were prominent concerns raised by Syrian groups, particularly among those determined to continue their education, including those expressing a desire to return to their home country and contribute to its rebuilding efforts.

“I want to continue my education but I am scared of being deported in the future.”
(Bekaa, Male Syrian Participant)

“I swear to God, they used to bully us because we are Syrians and no one cares about us.” (North, Female Syrian Participant)

Peers' Life

In the third and final part of the focus group discussions, adolescents delved into the lives of their peers. They were asked about who their friends were, how they met, and where and how they spent time together¹². All 40 groups actively participated in this discussion, demonstrating high responsiveness to the topic. According to the adolescents, the majority of their friends were from outside the school, particularly from the same neighborhood or village, and sometimes from the same camp or family relatives, as mentioned in all 40 discussions. School peers also formed a significant category, as highlighted in 32 discussions, while a few friendships were forged through interactions at local youth centers, community organizations, NGOs, or mosques, as conveyed in five discussion groups.

Regarding where they spent their leisure time together, notable differences emerged between girls' and boys' groups. Most girls (25 discussions) mentioned spending leisure time with friends at home, with the exception of Beirut, where girls appeared to have more movement and access to public spaces, while boys (28 discussions) cited additional options such as cafes, snack restaurants, computer centers, mosques, or simply hanging out in neighborhood streets (mentioned in 19 discussions). Learning centers and schools were mentioned as options for spending time with friends in only two discussions.

Furthermore, adolescents described two major activities that defined how they spent time with their friends and peers. Chatting, whether in person or via social media and messaging, emerged in 26 discussions and was the most common activity, especially among girls. On the other hand, playing games such as football or video games appeared in 24 discussions and was mainly mentioned by boys' groups. Two other activities of lesser prominence were brought up: meeting to smoke shisha, mentioned in 5 discussions, and spending time in group studies, which was mentioned in 4 discussions.

“My friends are my cousins, we do everything together. My school peers, I forgot them.” (North, Female Syrian Participant)

“We mostly stay at home, visit each other, go to a café, or chat on social media.” (South, Female Lebanese Participant)

“We spend our nights on the streets ‘chilling out’ until the sun rises.” (North, Male Lebanese Participant)

Summary on Gender and Syrian Refugees Cross-Cutting Themes

All the accounts provided by adolescent groups regarding their peers' lives revealed similar views and challenges among Lebanese and Syrian adolescent boys and girls. They demonstrated notable resilience and the ability to engage with their peers despite limited access to safe youth spaces and leisure activities. However, a distinction between boys and girls was evident in the nature of peer activities. The majority of girls spent their time chatting and using social media or visiting each other at home, except for girls in the Beirut area who appeared to have more freedom of movement and access to public spaces. Boys, on the other hand, had noticeably more options such as going to cafes, playing video games and football, or simply hanging out in neighborhood streets. Syrian adolescents, particularly girls, were among the most vulnerable due to restrictions on movement and increased insecurity.

“Here in the camp we have no coffee shops no clubs, only that little shop at the entrance of the camp where we gather. We don't have money to go elsewhere, and we're afraid to leave the camp.” (North, Male Syrian Participant)

“I don't leave the camp because I am afraid, my only friends are inside the school.” (North, Female Syrian Participant)

¹² In reference to Questions 12 and 13

IV. Interpretation

This qualitative research aimed to address a central question: What are the educational and social factors experienced by vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugees that either enhance or hinder their prospects of completing their education? The findings elucidate several critical trends and perceptions voiced by the adolescents themselves, serving as responses to the six sub-questions derived from the main research question

1. What Role (or Influence?) Do Socio-Economic Circumstances Play in Shaping Adolescents' Educational Trajectories?

The findings from the adolescents' discussions revealed intricate dynamics between family relationships and economic vulnerability. While the adolescents' economic circumstances emerged as a significant push factor leading many to struggle with education and drop out of school, the strong family relationships and outstanding parental support for their children's education served as a crucial counterbalance influencing the adolescents' continuation of schooling. This finding aligns with El Amine et al. study (2021-a), which highlight the pivotal role of the family factor in the life of youth. The study reveals that youth attribute their poor socio-economic situation to the conditions of their family members in terms of work and health status. At the economic level, the majority of adolescent respondents reported unfavorable economic circumstances, particularly pronounced in the North region where the crisis was more severe. In contrast, a smaller group in Beirut described the economic situation as tolerable. Despite regional differences, most adolescent boys and girls, both Lebanese and Syrian, recognized a clear deterioration in their overall economic situations, heightening their vulnerability. They expressed awareness and frustration about economic limitations while omitting any political correlations within their discussions, even among the Lebanese groups. Adolescents expressed frustration about their heightened sense of deprivation, yet they also exhibited resilience by adapting to the status quo and directing their frustration towards a collective understanding of vulnerability. They recognized that they were not alone in facing economic hardships, leading them to adopt a submissive attitude devoid of defiance or protest. Despite these challenges, adolescents' accounts highlighted various coping mechanisms employed by their parents, such as borrowing money, relying on aid, or cutting expenditures. These echo the findings of El amine et al (ElAmine, 2021-a) study, which highlights how youth navigate with these circumstances through cooperation and solidarity with their families, by sharing income and controlling expenditure. Moreover, these findings also align with those of UNICEF, which indicate that 84% families resort to borrowing money for essential items and needs. Even though the parents strongly supported their children's education, the prevailing coping measure underscored the extent of economic hardship's impact on adolescents' educational pathways. As reported in 27 out of 40 FGDs, many adolescents stated that they were compelled to drop out of school to work and support their families, particularly boys, while girls were often kept at home to save on educational expenses and assist with household chores and caregiving. Among those continuing their education, many expressed a shift towards vocational education for economic purposes, while others reconsidered their desired specialties due to cost considerations. When specifically addressed about reasons for leaving school, out-of-school adolescents¹³ confirmed that their families' economic vulnerability and inability to afford educational costs were the dominant factors. Notably, 44% of the total sample were out of school, (160 out of 361), with 104 of them being Syrian, predominantly girls (67 out of 104). This finding corresponds with the results of VASyr and OCHA where the main barriers for Syrian refugees' school attendance was the cost of transportation, followed by the costs of educational materials and expenses. Overall, it was evident that both adolescents and their parents highly valued education for its indisputable importance in improving their lives and futures. Therefore, giving up on education was not an easy choice nor their preferred one in facing economic hardship. However, it remained the most inflicted coping mechanism on adolescents due to increased vulnerability and the absence of comprehensive educational solutions and livelihood opportunities for their families.

¹³ According to research sampling, 160 out of total 361 participants were out of school (44% of the participants) were divided as follows by gender (76 boys, 84 girls) and nationality (55 Lebanese and 105 Syrian adolescents).

2. How does the Quality of Education and the School Environment Offered Influence Adolescents' Decisions to Continue Their Education or Drop Out?

According to the adolescents, the second most critical factor influencing their decision to leave school, after economic reasons, pertains to issues related to the **school itself**. This was discussed in 28 out of 35 group discussions where common barriers were highlighted. These included lack of transportation, school proximity, repeated school closures, teacher absenteeism, rising educational costs, curriculum difficulties, and hurdles related to documentation, which were particularly challenging for Syrian adolescents. However, the accounts of the adolescents went beyond the challenges related to education access to address the quality of education and the school environment. Additionally, there was a growing trend among the adolescents, namely boys, to shift to vocational education due to their academic underperformance in schools and the pressing need to seek a lucrative pathway.

Quality of Education

The adolescents emphasized that the quality of education and the school environment played a pivotal role in shaping their connection with education, influencing their commitment to it or decision to give up on it. Interlinked, the quality of education and the school environment are inseparable. When specifically asked about their viewpoints on the quality of education, the adolescents were evenly divided between two standpoints: those who perceived the quality of their school education as good and those who viewed it as bad. Both groups' accounts revealed that the quality of education primarily hinges on the quality of teaching. To the adolescents, the teacher's role is twofold: first, to possess the necessary competence and experience in teaching skills and knowledge, surpassing outdated methods by adopting innovative and interactive approaches; second, to demonstrate care and attention for students' needs, well-being, and performance, treating them with respect and empathy. Some of the most painful experiences shared by the adolescents were related to being neglected, insulted, and subjected to disrespect, severity, and violence by their teachers.

Adolescents who experienced good and caring teachers expressed attachment to schools and gratitude for inspiring them to become better students. They felt confident that education would help them improve their lives and achieve their dreams. Conversely, those who had the opposite experience expressed frustration and struggled to understand the difficult curriculum and keep up with school education. Some even expressed a lack of faith in the value of education, considering it obsolete due to the poor quality of teaching and their increased feelings of self-doubt and lack of fulfillment. Some adolescents even voiced repulsion for school due to the cruelty and demoralizing approach of some teachers, leading them to renounce education. These accounts were common among all Lebanese and Syrian boys and girls, indicating a lack of institutional compliance with teachers' qualifications and accountability, and an overall lack of systemic standardization and uniformity. These observations related to quality of education resonate with El Amine et al (2021-b) study, which reveals that the prevailing sentiment among youth who participated in the study was that the quality of education is subpar due to reasons attributed to teachers and their use of violence in addition to the curriculum itself. Additionally, the literature underscores the critical role of teachers in crisis contexts, where limited school infrastructure and learning materials often make teachers the sole resource available to adolescents, emphasizing the significance of their role (Henderson et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the school environment was predominantly influenced by the school's governance, which extended beyond providing basic services and operational management to encompassing leadership that fostered safety, order, and provided a nurturing and protective environment. Here again, adolescents were divided in their experiences: some had the benefit of attending schools that offered a nurturing and safe environment, while others described their schools in negative terms, equating them to prisons. For those who had bad experiences, the school environment was portrayed as chaotic and turbulent, where students were left on their own with no support or care from teachers or principals. They were exposed to various forms of disrespect and humiliation, including violence, bullying, and discrimination by both teachers and peers, and where their needs and voices were suppressed.

While group discussions showed no significant differences between Lebanese and Syrian adolescent boys and girls regarding their viewpoints related to the school environment, it is noteworthy to highlight that bullying was mostly raised by the Syrian adolescent groups and that the level of violence, the spreading of drugs, and school fights was particularly grave in the region of North. On the other hand, the groups who experienced positive school environments attributed this fact mainly to having good teachers who cared for them, enjoying peer friendship and support, feeling valued and protected by principals who held teachers accountable for mistreating students, and being offered extra-curricular and youth activities and school trips that allowed them to have pleasurable and rewarding time within their school communities. Implicit in the adolescents' discussions was nearly a call for a "humanized school education," where the quality of education and school environments are not restricted to academic provision and operational management, but more importantly where 'human connections' and relationships are nurtured at all levels and with all school members, starting from teachers and principals and ending with peers and friends. This conclusion is confirmed in El Amine's study (2021-b), which suggests that principals, teachers, and students share the responsibility of positive or negative school environment. Clearly, the adolescents valued education in its broader meaning, where learning encompassed academic knowledge and performance as well as personal development and human growth.

3. To What Extent Do Peers Influence Adolescents' Decisions to Remain in School or Drop out?

For the adolescents, the subject of peers was among the most engaging discussions, with all groups actively participating. Peers played a significant role in their lives, comprising a substantial part of their social circle. However, it was often peers from their neighborhoods, villages, or camps, along with family relatives, who held a more prominent place in their lives. The influence of peers was more pronounced outside the school environment than within. Therefore, the adolescents did not relate their school peers to their school continuation when peer interactions were naturally supportive and convivial. However, El Amine et al. study (2021-c) suggests that peers exert a significant influence on their target population. This difference in findings could be attributed to variations in the target population, with El Amine et al. study focusing on older individuals (aged 15 to 24 years). It is hypothesized that as youth grow older, their relationships with peers become deeper and stronger, thereby amplifying the influence of peer dynamics on their decisions regarding education.

When discussing interactions with school peers, it was noted that peer relationships were closely correlated with the quality of education and the school environments they experienced. Those who attended schools providing safe and friendly environments also had the opportunity to develop cordial and supportive peer relationships. When asked about their favorite school memories, adolescents instantly recalled the fun times spent with peers, sharing personal stories, goofing around the school, and participating in school activities or trips whenever offered.

However, adolescents attending schools lacking conducive, safe environments were exposed to "bad peers" who influenced many to leave school, especially in the North where youth gangs engaged in drugs and violent activities within schools, becoming a direct push factor for dropout. Mentions of gangs and violence were also reported in the South. Some adolescents expressed deep regret for associating with such negative influences, leading them to abandon school and squander their educational opportunities. Others, particularly boys, cited the influence of peers who had left school to work, encouraging them to follow suit.

It was evident that school did not represent a significant space for nurturing peer relationships in the lives of adolescents. Despite limited access to safe youth spaces and leisure activities, adolescents demonstrated resilience, finding ways to enjoy their time with peers through chatting and messaging on social media or home visits, especially for girls. Boys had more options such as going to cafes, playing video games and football, or simply hanging out in the neighborhood streets. Peers from outside schools primarily served as sources of support and enjoyment.

4. What Are the Primary Factors Influencing Adolescents' Decisions to Stay in School, Including Their Aspirations to Overcome Deprivation?

Factors such as access to free public education, ease of registration processes, reachable schools in terms of proximity and seat capacity, and provision of aid from organizations to cover transportation and school materials were crucial in maintaining school attendance. However, the most dominant factors that stood out in the adolescents' discussions went beyond material provisions or aid. The motivation of adolescents who chose to persist with schooling despite push factors and temptations to dropout stemmed essentially from their determination for self-growth and desire to overcome conditions of deprivation, paired with strong support and encouragement from their parents. In terms of the perceived value of education, the adolescents expressed various views. Some saw its importance in practical applications, such as reading road signs and medical prescriptions or educating and supporting their own children in the future. However, the majority perceived education for higher purposes, serving as a major incentive to commit to schooling and cope with economic and educational challenges.

Personal incentives shared by adolescents revealed a mix of qualities including ambition, hard work, having a vision for the future, and strong determination. The significant support of parents for their children's education reinforced adolescents' commitment and willpower. This category of adolescents showcased a "transformative sense of resilience," leveraging personal incentives and parental solidarity to overcome challenges. They believed in the value and power of education to change realities, build better lives and futures, achieve social mobility, and empower themselves. For many girls, education was considered an emancipatory tool to become empowered and liberated from men's financial dependence and authority, while for some Syrian refugee adolescents, education was the pathway to rebuild their country one day. Some adolescents worked during summers to save for school transportation or while attending school to cover educational expenses. Others turned to YouTube or other online tools for self-learning when faced with difficulty understanding the curriculum. While specific career aspirations were less elaborated, the goal for many was to secure better lives, make good earnings to support their families, or seek opportunities abroad, mainly for the boys. Gratitude and responsibility towards helping parents in the future were apparent, highlighting family solidarity and bonding. In conclusion, the special resilience exhibited by adolescents committed to their education despite challenges stemmed from deeper meanings in life such as care, faith, purpose, and belief in the possibility of change.

5. What Alternative Educational Pathways Do Adolescents Propose to Enhance Educational Opportunities?

In reflecting on their educational future and on their current and alternative education pathways, the adolescents expressed a strong preference for practical learning over traditional educational achievement, which they felt lacked the provision of applicable skills and contemporary knowledge. Learning, for them was hindered by a flat and outdated curriculum, alongside the didactic teaching approach that emphasized rote learning, memorization and a standardized approach that failed to address their specific needs and aspirations. In response, the adolescents advocated for more educational guidance and a customized approach that aligns with their various learning levels. They called for an interactive, hands-on educational experience that incorporates projects, group work, and relevant subjects such as digital literacy and robotics. They praised hybrid learning that integrates self-paced learning because it provided flexibility for adolescents who work to support their families, allowing them to learn at their own pace and not fall behind. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of youth extracurricular activities including art, music, and sports clubs as sources of enrichment and opportunities for peer bonding and self-development experiences that were lacking in their formal education. This aligns with El Amine's findings (2021-b), which highlight the positive perception of extracurricular activities which were linked to camaraderie with schoolmates, emphasizing their role in fostering a supportive and enriching school environment and improving self-esteem of those with low academic performance.

The alternative educational pathways that resonated the most with the adolescents' priorities appeared in 24 FGDs and referred to non-formal education, which focused on short-term training and courses in subjects such as English, digital skills, and entrepreneurship. Vocational education was also highly mentioned and was not limited to conventional specialties such as carpentry for boys and beauty care for girls. Instead, it evoked innovative tech-based and social media-related specialties that are increasingly in demand and linked to livelihood and income-generating opportunities, which appeared to be a key motivation for many adolescents.

6. What Differences Exist Between Boys and Girls, As Well As Between Lebanese and Syrian Adolescents, In Their Chosen Educational Paths and the Factors Influencing Their Decisions?

Distinctive Aspects Concerning Syrian Refugees:

The accounts of the majority of the adolescents didn't show any major differences between Lebanese and Syrian groups in their overall views and perceptions about their socio-economic living circumstances, school experience and peer's life. Both groups, Lebanese and Syrian refugees groups, seemed to agree on their increased economic vulnerability, although the level of vulnerability sounded more acute among the Syrian groups, especially in terms of housing, ease of movement, livelihood opportunities, and access to services, including health. Despite the overall similarities of experiences between the vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugee groups, certain distinctive elements were noted, particularly affecting the adolescent Syrian refugees.

What clearly was apparent in the case of the Syrian refugee adolescents was a sense of conflicting feelings. On one hand, fear has become part of their lives due to the push factors to leave Lebanon and the increased limitations. On the other hand, like their Lebanese counterparts, Syrian adolescents maintained their commitment to education and active peer lives, fostering an adaptive resilience and a sense of de facto connection with their host country, Lebanon while coping with their enduring challenges. However, the factors most vocalized by Syrian adolescent groups, which particularly affected their school education, were related to inconsistent registration regulations. Many Syrian adolescents mentioned continuous hindering requirements for official papers and a lack of clarity regarding available schools that could accommodate and enroll Syrian refugee children.

Moreover, Syrian adolescents who experienced extended school interruptions and continued their education in the non-formal sector had no clear educational pathway beyond the BLN and YBLN programs implemented by many NGOs in the education sector. Many found themselves with no educational future but to work and focus on earning income. Those still attending school faced challenges such as lack of transport support and difficulties attending second-shift classes, especially during the winter semester. Many mentioned relying fully on aid to cover educational costs, primarily for transport and school supplies. Additionally, the issue of school bullying was predominantly raised by Syrian adolescent groups, who sounded resigned and accustomed to it due to increased fear and insecurity felt among Syrian refugee adolescents and their families. Lastly, some Syrian adolescents expressed a unique incentive for committing to their education: their desire to return to Syria one day and contribute to its rebuilding.

Distinctive Aspects Concerning Adolescent Girls:

Similarly, it is noteworthy that accounts of the majority of the adolescents didn't show any major differences either between the adolescent boys and girls in their overall views and attitudes about their socio-economic living circumstances, school experience and peer's life. Both groups, boys and girls, expressed their increased vulnerability due to their economic hardship. Both, boys and girls were very vocal about the support of their parents and the strong family ties and solidarity that bond them together despite any minor tensions or disagreement. Regarding school life, both boys and girls shared the same experiences and were nearly equally split between those who had positive school experiences and those who had negative school experiences for the reasons that were elucidated above. However, despite these similarities between boys and girls, there were some distinctive elements that appeared additionally in the case of girls that need to be highlighted: At the family level, girls appeared to experience a mix of conflicting situations. On one hand, they showed an increased level of awareness regarding their rights to education. However, they were still constrained by social norms and responsibilities, exacerbated by the deteriorating security and economic circumstances. These dynamics had two main implications for the girls' educational pathways:

- 1) Increased girls' empowerment was evident in their boldness in voicing conflicts and tension with parents or siblings, particularly regarding discriminatory parental treatment between genders and the control exerted by older brothers over their movement and freedom, as cited mostly by the Syrian girls. In contrast, boys' groups didn't seem to experience any family struggle and conveyed mostly a sense of support and solidarity with their parents and siblings. However, the parents' unequivocal support for their children's education appeared to be the second most important factor that helped the adolescents pursue their education, which was noticeably more articulated by the adolescent girls. Some of them mentioned that parents would highly encourage them to continue their education even after marriage. Additionally, one of the factors that contributed specifically to the girls' pursuance of education was the growing incentive to become self-independent and liberated from men's financial control and authority. This was mentioned in several girls' discussions and showcased a rising recognition of girls' rights and freedom of choice, especially among the Syrian girls for whom education was considered an emancipatory tool that protected them from early marriage and allowed them to own their choice and decisions. These observations are consistent with findings from the Secondary Education Working Group (SEWG), particularly regarding the use of child early and forced marriage as a coping mechanism during periods of insecurity and economic pressure.
2. Many girls, especially among the Syrian adolescents who appeared the most vulnerable and represented the highest number of school dropouts among the participants sample, were compelled to leave school to reduce educational costs and assist with household chores and caring for younger siblings. In addition to the economic hardship, social pressure on girls was exacerbated by the unstable security situation, which limited girls' movement and created more family tension, especially among Syrian girls who struggled with the domination and control of their elder brothers. In some cases, girls' school attendance was encouraged by parents because of the accompaniment and protection of their male siblings.

On the other hand, school dropout due to early marriage was mentioned only 7 times by Syrian girls' groups and was primarily cited as a socio-cultural norm that some parents still endorsed, rather than a coping mechanism in facing economic hardship. Economic hardship also impacted the educational pathways of girls who were determined to pursue their educational dreams. As mentioned by girls' groups, their economic vulnerability led them to give up on their desired educational paths by limiting their choices and opting for less costly future specialties such as the girl who desired to study fashion design but she could no longer pursue it because it was an extremely expensive major.

In conclusion, the Syrian refugee girls appeared the most vulnerable group of all the participant groups in this research.

V. Recommendations



For the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE):

1. System Strengthening

- Reinforce the effective implementation and mainstreaming of the newly improved school protection policy by ensuring a robust monitoring system and accountability mechanisms are in place
- Re-assess and improve recruitment process of teachers and schools' principals and ensure its effective implementation through a robust monitoring and accountability mechanism.

2. Quality of Education

Rethink Quality Education in context of Crisis and Emergencies by addressing the following:

- Conduct comprehensive research to understand the specific needs and challenges of teachers and school principals to improve and expand teachers training and schools principals training within Lebanon's fragile context and in alignment with the national strategy of MEHE.
- Provide improved Teachers Training (ToT) by building on existing training packages and research findings of teachers needs and challenges to equip teachers with the needed higher order and complex skills in emergencies encompassing advanced pedagogy including digital and hybrid learning, differentiated learning, learning assessment, improved integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and transformative resilience.
- Design a comprehensive School Principals Leadership Training (ToT) program by building on the research findings of the schools' principals needs and challenges, and on best practices to equip them with advanced skills and knowledge in school governance and leadership that foster safe and enabling learning environments that enhance peer relationships and learning experiences.

3. Improved and Expanded Access for Adolescents Age Group in Emergencies

Rethink and improve educational pathways for vulnerable and out of school adolescents in context of crisis and emergencies.

- Re-assess the vocational education by conducting a national research to evaluate the relevance and impact of the current vocational education's offerings and identify effective improvements in programming and structure that are better aligned with the job market and livelihood opportunities as well as with the adolescents' aspirations.
- Develop a framework of alternative pathways that provide relevant and recognized educational opportunities in the Non-Formal sector that NFE actors can apply with Out of School adolescents.
- Re-activate and improve Accelerated Education programming based on learning lessons and best practices for vulnerable out of school adolescents who are keen to pursue their formal education despite the interruption of school education.
- In the case of the Syrian Refugees students:
 - Strengthen the implementation of standardized and unified registration processes for Syrian refugee children in second shifts
 - Provide educational trajectory beyond basic literacy and numeracy programs (BLN/YBLN) through a clear transitioning process from NFE to Formal Education.

For Institutions in the Education Sector:

- **Implement Holistic Education Interventions that tackle the complexities of the context of crisis and emergencies:**

In designing education programs, employ a comprehensive approach that addresses the multifaceted needs of vulnerable adolescents, including refugees by integrating protection, parental engagement and livelihood opportunities, cash for education, educational guidance and coaching to facilitate informed choices regarding educational pathways.

- **Reassess Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programming & strengthen its integration in schools:**

Reassess the impact of SEL in emergencies by enhancing its design and integration into the school curriculum, and strengthening the component of human relationships among students, teachers, and school leaders to transform school environments into enabling spaces that promote "human connections" and "transformative resilience." Youth clubs and extra-curricular activities are highly recommended to nurture peer relationships and foster a culture of school belonging.

- **Upgrade and Prioritize Educational Content with a Focus on Relevance and Skills-based Learning:**

Upgrade school and NFE educational content by including most relevant subjects that resonate with adolescents' needs and aspirations such as advanced English, digital literacy, STEM, robotics, and project-based learning. And shift to skills-based learning by fostering competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills.

For Donors:

- **Allocate Funding for Secondary and Vocational Education:**

Allocate funding specifically for secondary education, including vocational training, to support the educational advancement of vulnerable adolescents.

- **Invest in Teacher Training to scale Quality Education Provision:**

Support and fund teacher training as a key component in providing quality education at scale.

- **Finance the Provision of Holistic Education Interventions that tackle the complexities of the context of crisis and emergencies:**

 - **Finance Livelihood Opportunities:**

 - Fund initiatives that create innovative livelihood opportunities for both parents of school-attending children and out-of-school youths striving to continue their education and enhance their educational skills and learning.

 - **Support the Enrichment of NFE Content beyond BLN:**

 - Provide funding for enriched and relevant educational content that goes beyond BLN and prepares for an effective bridging of NFE to Formal Education.

 - **Fund Cash for Education**

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